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Book A 35

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VIEWS OF THE
HON. J. L. ALCORN
—ON THE—
POLITICAL SITUATION
OF MISSISSIPPI.

Messrs. Jno. W. Vance, John P. Caruthers, Thomas S. Tate, James H. Scaife and others, Hernando, Mississippi:

GENTLEMEN: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 1st inst. In that communication you inform me that a meeting is to be convened at Hernando on the 12th, for the purpose of public counsel on the policy of the State. My good friends, the Hon. J. W. C. Watson, Gen'l W. S. Featherston and Col. H. W. Walter, you inform me, will assist on the occasion by addresses on the duty of the hour; and you pay me the compliment of an invitation to contribute the result of my reflections on the political situation, to the mass of opinion which you propose to bring out. In answer to your invitation, Gentlemen, I regret to say that, tho' tempted to accept by a sense of duty to my own interests, to the interests of my fellow sufferers of Mississippi, and to the complimentary spirit of your letter, the demands of my business, place it out of my power to take part in your well-timed meeting.

The ardent temper of our people generally, makes them, naturally, partisans. That bent of our Southern natures has done, in the prosperous past, effective service to party discipline; but in the terrible *present* that has come upon us it threatens to prove fatal. The temper of the partisan has had its day; the temper proper to our position now is that of *statesmanship*. Men will, for example, tell you that I am a Radical; and by that simple cry, arm against me an array of factious passions covered by an *abattis* impassable to the approach of reason. This is of the madness of those whom the gods wish to destroy. Even tho' I be, in reality, a very Radical, writhing as I am under the ban of treason, does it follow that when we are looking around for counsel against the dangers impending over us all, my words, unpalatable tho' they are, may not, after all, be the words of wisdom and sound policy?

Clap-trap and passion are, I repeat, out of place in this moment of our grievous tribulation. If the advice prompted by my poor judgment be really the best, let it, in God's name, be adopted. I am perfectly ready to adopt a more effective policy the moment I shall have been shown it in a discussion tempered by the frankness, moderation and earnest gravity, proper to gentlemen deliberating on the means of saving all that remains to them of liberty and fortune.

Opinion in Memphis has, I am told, denounced me as a radical. When a pre-existing majority of whites had been supplemented by the extension of suffrage to the blacks, I repudiated the fond delusion which counted a few weeks ago on the defeat of Gov. Brownlow. Did that anticipation of the event make me a radical? Reasoning from my convictions as to the then-coming state of affairs in Tennessee, I have, certainly, held for months past that, let the whites of Mississippi say or do what they will, the State will go on without let or hindrance with the work of reconstruction. Does that conclusion of my judgment make me a radical? But whether a radical or not, the true test of my opinions is that of their truth or their wisdom; and I will therefore pass by the out-cry of faction to put their truth and wisdom briefly in proof.

Registration in three-fourths of Alabama foreshadows, according to the newspapers, a majority in that State of 25,000 colored voters. According to the census of 1860, the white males of that State numbered 270,000, the negro males 219,000. The estimated majority of the registration in Alabama may therefore be approximated from the data of the census of 1860, by deducting from the black males *seventy-two per cent. of the white males*. In other words: assuming that the negro adults of Alabama have not decreased since 1860, the white male adults of that State have disappeared from its suffrage by death and disfranchisement to the extent of twenty-eight per cent. of all the white males!

Registration has been completed in Louisiana. In that State there is, according to the newspapers, a black majority of 30,000. The white males of Louisiana numbered in 1860, 190,000; the black males 180,000. The actual majority of voters may be approximated in that case by subtracting from the total number of black males *seventy-nine per cent. of all the white males*. Death and disfranchisement have done their work, therefore, amongst the adult whites of Louisiana—assuming the adult blacks not to have decreased since 1860,—to the extent of twenty-one per cent of all the males of the State!

The light shed upon our position by the facts of registration in Alabama and Louisiana, may serve as a torch to guide us through our Plutonian darkness. The census of 1860 sets down the colored males of Mississippi at 220,000; the white males at 186,000. On the basis of the approximation made above for Alabama, these figures foreshadow the result of registration amongst ourselves at a colored majority of 86,000! On the basis of the approximation which has been deduced from the facts in Louisiana, the negro majority on the registration of Mississippi, will reach 75,000! The general truth embodied in those estimates of the *probabilities* of the case is, certainly, not overstated when I assert that the military bill fastens down upon us, for weal or for woe, all the consequences of a large negro majority.

Follow out the general facts presented here, and the foreshadowings of the military bill are equally explicit. Take the *average* deduction from the white males as shown in the above approximation for Alabama and Louisiana, at twenty-five per cent.; and follow out the inquiry as to the *distribution* of the negro majority throughout the several counties of the State. Of the sixty counties of Mississippi, three, represent cases of *close* votes as between the whites and blacks, but majorities in favor of the negroes hold absolutely in no less than thirty-two counties. Not only in

the Governor of the State subject to the choice of the colored vote; but so also is the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the court of last resort. Mark you: *the court of last resort*. The brute force which lies ready to sustain that state of affairs we have no means of wrestling with save that embodied in our *brains*.

The Loyal League is upon you. Even a brief experience of the workings of that voting machine would satisfy you, as it has me, that all which our people claim for the influence of the "old master" on the freedman is neither more nor less than *nonsense*. The terrible necessities of our position demand blunt speaking. The general fact on the face of the late election in Tennessee ought to satisfy the dullest intelligence as to the power of the "old master" in the presence of the Loyal League. If any one fail to accept that proof, I commend his muddy reflection to the case of those hundreds of gentlemen in Memphis who, in a resentment not more reprehensible for its folly than for its injustice, are said to have dismissed for the exercise of the right of suffrage freely and independently, those trusty negroes who have occupied towards them the confidential relation of their Porters, their Messengers, their Body-servants. The 'old master,' gentlemen, has passed from fact to poetry!

Holding that in this State, a large majority of the voters under the Military Bill are blacks; holding that under the state of opinion which exists to-day amongst the whites, that majority falls by political gravitation into the hands of radicalism; and holding that the question of a convention is consequently settled beyond all possibility of defeat, call me what passion may, my acceptance of the inevitable leads me, in contemptuous indifference to the babble of weak-pated partisanship, to make an earnest attempt to avert material and political ruin from myself, my family and my fellow-sufferers of the State generally, by the only means available for that purpose—*negotiation*. I stand ready to ask terms from the radicals.

The man who speaks of the policy of the party in power as one actuated by *passion*, I cannot stoop to notice. Our reasoning must begin at a higher level. I proceed, therefore, to canvass the course of the radicals in order to ascertain its *object*. That done, the question before us will be as to whether or not we cannot present to the invincible power in whose grasp we writhe, other means of arriving at that object than those involving our own destruction. And that question, Gentlemen, is one which neither you nor I can afford to deal with in any other mood than that of cool-headed deliberation.

The legislation of congress is evidently directed more than ordinarily by the necessities of party. A sectional organization must necessarily prove so directed. The republicans deem it, therefore, a necessity to obtain support at the *South*. Negro suffrage is a logical sequence from that fact: the radicals failed to find, in all this broad section of ours, any hope of support amongst the whites. Opposed to that measure themselves save as a necessity of power, they accepted it with fear and trembling as to its effect upon their popularity at the North. That effect has not yet taken form. Republican apprehension may be assumed anxious to cut it down to the least dimensions. Black Senators or black members of the House as a result of that measure, is a possibility which the radicals may be fairly held to regard with fear. A white man sent to the Senate or to the Lower House of Congress by a mass of suffrage purely negro, is also a contingent sequence of colored enfranchisement that, in reviewing republican reflection, may be set down as one from which the great body of the party would gladly escape. These considerations and others too complex to be entered into here, point to the high expediency that may be supposed to actuate the radicals in favor of a support embracing not only Southern Blacks but also Southern whites.

I am not prepared to hold in itself as in its dealing with me and mine, to mean-

ures of desperation. Enthusiasts are free to do as they please; but, I belong to the school of men that does not shrink from parley with even ruin. My mental vision is afflicted more or less with a blindness which fails to see the yellow-glory said to surround the head of martyrdom.

The people of Mississippi can afford no better than the radicals themselves, to permit the organization of parties here to drift into distinctions of color. Black and white, rich and poor, our people may well shrink from that condition of things, charged, as it may be fairly assumed to be, with all the unspeakable horrors of a war of races. The expediency which, in defence of party power on the one hand, and of social existence on the other, is seen, thus, to be common to the radical and the Mississippian, I propose to utilize. I propose to employ it as a ground on which to make terms with the radicals on the part of the people of the State of Mississippi. If this be radicalism, then indeed, gentlemen, do I confess that I am a thorough radical; and give to the poor babblers who cry fie upon my views, the full benefit of that available fact for clap-trap.

The colored man comes, as well as the white man, within the scope of my proposed negotiation. Free, erect, enfranchised, with all the rights of American citizenship attaching to him, the terms which I seek to obtain shall not be one iota more to your advantage or to mine than to his. All that Congress has given him I accept as *his* with all my heart and conscience. I propose to vote with him; to discuss political affairs with him; to sit, if need be, in political counsel with him; and from a platform acceptable alike to him, to me, and to you, to pluck our common liberty and our common prosperity out of the jaws of inevitable ruin.

The mixed party which I suggest, must be made acceptable to Congressional *loyalty*. The rejection of the delegation of Kentucky by the Federal Congress shows that we can make negotiation with the Northern majority on no other basis. That condition lies at the very foundation of the alliance on which my wrestle with ruin proposes to rest amongst *ourselves*. And, furthermore, the power with which I seek to make terms for our people of all complexions, would reject, peremptorily, any party with an organization permitted to embody an element obnoxious to the suspicion of treachery in the approaching struggle for place with the democracy of the North.

Old memories are said to give color to my views on the policy of the State, —my liberties some may suppose not precious to my soul. Unless partisan hostility hold me to be less than a man, less than even a brute, it must concede to me some regard for the well-being of my wife and children. The bread of these beloved ones, like that, gentlemen, of your own families, is at stake on the question which I consider in this letter; and surely that fact ought to be an ample guarantee that the advice I give my fellow sufferers in this time of our common affliction, is not likely to be more earnest than it is dispassionate. Whether the cry "old whig!" "old whig!" be continued against me or not, I feel it my duty to state here that every interest of the State, material and political, demands absolutely that those of our leaders who have been original secessionists shall be excluded from all our attempts to make terms for the relief of our people.

The people of the South have been blended in Northern opinion with the plans of the Northern democracy. The hatred with which that body is regarded by the republicans will expose any political movement of the Southern whites to searching suspicion. Our salvation depends, therefore, on saving all attempts for its accomplishment from *every trace* of democratic sympathy.

The old unionists of the South have no especial reason to love, no hankering memories to yearn for, that Northern party which entered on the desolation of their

homes by an act of political treachery. And these unionists are, furthermore, the only men of the South whose participation in the rebellion can be supposed to receive from the stern loyalty of the party in power, that breadth of indulgence which may be counted on as a concession from the memories of former fellowship.

The confidence which, evidently, is the first condition of a successful movement for obtaining terms from congress can, I insist, be obtained in no other way than by excluding from the movement all others than the men known in the phrase of the pre-secession period as unionists, whether "old line whigs," or "Douglass democrats."

The limitation that I put upon the organization contemplated for bringing us within the scope of negotiation, is not fixed by choice, but by fact. The political bitterness of which I am accused has, I entreat you to believe, not been by any means the suggesting consideration in this scheme for our safety. Nor be assured, does the plan deduced here from the position of the question under consideration, contemplate for a moment that the men with whom I am associated in pleasant and kindly memories of the stump and forum for twenty long years, shall, whatever may have been the errors of their judgment as leaders, be excluded with my consent from the full enjoyment of all their rights and privileges as free-born Americans. I committed myself as you know to the madness of the revolution; but tho' that act was prompted by my devotion to my people against every dictate of my judgement, need I declare to you that I should be ashamed to seek for myself in this moment of political retribution, a restoration to any rights of person or property on the condition that the like measure of those rights be withheld from any man who participated with me in that fatal mistake? I shall never cease to protest with all the earnestness of my devotion to civil liberty, that every Mississippian, be his military grade or private fortune what it may, shall be restored to the full enjoyment of the heritage of freedom wrung by the commingled blood of our forefathers from the grasp of crowned monarchy.

A mixed party of unionists can obtain for us that great remedy for all our troubles—representation.

With a platform guaranteeing to the freedman all his rights as a citizen, providing generously for the education of his children, securing to him, by its exemption from seizure for debt, the enjoyment of a homestead, an influential and respectable mass of white people of Mississippi may maintain their position as advisers of the old and devoted servants of the South—the colored people. The alliance thus constituted will represent the political power of the State, and will therefore have reached the attitude of an authority under which it may open negotiations with the dominant party of the North, on the basis of the abolition of the cotton tax, the reconstruction of the levees, the earliest possible restoration to full political rights of all those of our people who are now proscribed, and such additional concessions as may be found on enquiry to be obtainable.

This brief review of the scheme I propose, need not go into the terms which will be extorted from us in exchange for our political and material safety. We will, of course, endeavor to obtain all we can, and except so far as may be demanded by our good faith, will seek to obtain it on the best possible conditions.

A constitutional amendment setting the question of secession forever at rest, all unionists of the South will accede to gladly. They will undoubtedly enter into any mutual guarantee for the sanctity of the bonded debt, of the pensions of soldiers, and of all rights vested, whether North or South. On the question of the Presidency, I have no hesitation now, as I have not had heretofore, in declaring my own preference for General Grant; but will urge that the new organization bow gracefully to the choice of the congressional party, provided only that the man chosen shall

not have committed himself to any policy of conflict with the spirit and intentions of the terms of the negotiation.

This policy will draw the lightning from the threatening cloud of universal suffrage. It will save the people of Mississippi from a domestic radicalism infinitely more dangerous to both black and white than that which has just triumphed in Tennessee. Having given the Northern organization whose governing passion is hatred of the Northern democracy, a respectable position at the South, the mixed body which I propose, will have inaugurated that happy time when, party purposes accomplished and revolutionary violence at an end, a magnanimous spirit, anxious to conciliate the people of the State, will throw open political privilege ungrudgingly to those of our leaders who are held for the moment under the ban attaching to the supposition of treasonable sentiments toward the Government.

My opinion as to the duty of the hour rests, you will have seen, on no abstract deductions of law. The Kentucky resolutions possess no more interest to the desperate necessities of the State here than do Doctor Gliddon's mummies. Between the President on the one hand and the Congress on the other, the constitution is entitled in this exigency to little more attention than it may receive at the hands of some curious antiquary. My reflection as to the means of saving the State take no notice of those fossils of the pre-secession period. Your meeting has been called, I assume, with the view of dealing practically with a revolution which rushes onward in fierce career; and I, therefore, advise, regardless of all old time formularity, that, as a bold man does in the case of a runaway horse whose bridle he essays to grasp, we *first run on with it for a distance sufficient to check its speed.*

The gravity of the interests involved in the condition of political affairs has led me to decide on the enforcement, as well as I am able, of the counsel sketched here, upon the people of Mississippi. With that view I contemplate a canvass of, at least, the most accessible portions of the State; and when entering on it shall, in acknowledgment of your complimentary request that I address your people at sometime subsequent to the 12th, begin the work at Hernando. Press of business prevents me from deciding when I can commence this self-imposed task; but hoping that I will be able to do so in about two weeks, I can only say now, that as soon as circumstances enable me to determine, I shall publish my appointments.

Thanking you for the consideration which prompted you to invite me to your meeting, I have the honor to be, gentlemen, with sincere respect,

Your present fellow-sufferer and former fellow-citizen,

J. L. ALCORN

River's Point, Miss., Aug. 8, 1857.

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